

The BANE and BLESSING of WEALTH

*Like all the greatest spiritual religions of humankind, Christianity realizes a profound danger to the better self in the pursuit and accumulation of wealth.*

*When a person lays up treasure, their heart almost inevitably is with their treasure.*

Both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible are explicit about the fearful consequences of social injustice. The intolerable gap between the rich and the poor has long been one of the most demonic forces in the world. It is a cause of enmity between the haves and the have-nots. The padded rich do not wish to come into contact with what would disturb their sensibilities. Not infrequently rich people may be charitable in a distant and perfunctory way: sit at a directors' meeting of the United Way, send a cheque to a charitable organization at Christmas. But close contact with the actual poor is too uncomfortable. In fact, in our contemporary society a public dislike of "welfare" people is quite evident.

The spiritual force of Christianity should be turned against the materialism and mammonism of our economic order. When we sacrifice human dignity and self-respect to increase the wealth of the select and privileged, to swell the bank accounts of the rich, we are to that extent serving mammon and denying the sacredness of life. When we make property and money the end of success, while denying the same opportunity to our neighbour we are self-regarding and not good neighbours.

It is the function of religion to teach the individual to value their moral

integrity more than their income. In the same way it is the function of religion to teach society to value human life more than property, and to value property only so far as it forms the material basis for the higher development of human life. When life and property are in apparent collision, life must take precedence. This is not only Christian but prudent.

This not to say that being poor is necessarily closer to sainthood than being wealthy. And where do many of us who are neither wealthy or poor by contemporary standards, we who may be described as "having some and wanting more," fit in?

Let it be noted that there is an "aura" or "ethos" about wealth. A rich person behaves differently, thinks differently, even seems to feel differently from those who are less affluent. You can tell people are rich without knowing anything about their possessions. Their wealth gives them a high degree of control over their environment. They often betray a sense of security, of *savoir faire*, even of authority, that is virtually impossible to duplicate gives them a high degree of control over their environment. They often show a sense of security, of *savoir faire*, even of authority, that is virtually impossible to duplicate by those with little wealth.

(Wealth, continued)

The poor on the other hand feel insecure, vulnerable, even desperate. They suffer from not having enough.

It is for this reason the realm of God views prosperity as a spiritual danger. For instance, the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy expresses great concern for the poor and their practical provisions for relief. (Read: Deuteronomy 15:1-15). Jesus quoted Deuteronomy and said: "You have the poor with you always and you can do good to them whenever you like." (St. Mark 14:7). The Old Testament ideal is that all share in the prosperity of the nation. Inequality is something to be opposed and eliminated.

Let us know that what we possess shapes our lives. In fact our possessions can possess us. Sharing with others with less and in need helps to overcome this happening.

Too much our contemporary society is showing dislike and criticism toward the poor, the unemployed, the single parents, the youth who have no paid work, and favouring the wealthy and the advantaged. This attitude is affecting our welfare programmes, public services, conservation, and public health. Affluence is a spiritual disease in a world in which many people suffer from not having enough.

**I believe poverty should be eliminated in Canada, and this should be designated as a major national goal.** We are one of the wealthiest nations in the world, and if we have aspirations to become a just society we must work towards

this end.

I was unforgetably impressed while attending the famous World's Fair, Expo '67, in Montreal, of the vision then of how humankind could live in peace and prosperity, with justice, sharing the bounties of nature and human ingenuity.

Our age is the first since the dawn of history to realize it is practical to make the benefits of civilization available to the whole human race. Whether we think of political or social life, the problems of hunger, peace, juvenile delinquency, mental health, overpopulation or education, these have become areas in which we can effect changes and plan solutions, and consequently for which we have acquired moral responsibility. The so-called "puritan ethic" which inextricably bound work, income and human worth together is not suitable for humankind, or practical, in this era of abundance and rapid change. As well, nowadays where the need for workers will continue to decrease with the enlarging of technology, it is ludicrous to base the right to an income on an ability to find a job. Today in our country there is a concerted effort to make our social programmes to be ruled by economics, so that almost our entire personal and social life is permeated with a certain economic way of thinking. Traditional charity looks upon the recipient as an unfortunate victim. Such an attitude is criminal in this, one of the richest countries in the world. A decent living standard should be the right of every person here simply because he or she is a human being.

The doctrine of stewardship needs to be intensified and broadened by the democratic idea. Every person

(Stewardship & Wealth, cont'd)

AS I LOOK AT BREAD

who has wealth and power is not only a steward of God, but a steward of the people. The wealth is derived from the people and held in trust for the people. If it is converted to ones own use, the people can justly call the person to account in the court of public opinion and in the courts of the law. If the law has given an absolute title to certain forms of prosperity and has neglected to insist on the ingredient of public property and rights involved in it, that does not settle the moral title in the least. Religion is important these days to point out the latent public rights and to quicken the conscience of stewards who have forgotten their stewardship.

In turn, the religious sense of stewardship would be reinforced by the increased sense of social obligation. Our laws and social institutions have so long taught that property is ones own and one can do as one wishes with their own, that religion has uphill work in teaching we are not owners, but administrators. Many have failed to develop a social consciousness.

As long as the principalities and powers do our sinning for us we can feel not responsible, but as individuals we must lend our influence to the corporate group and initiate changes. It belongs to the religious person, without waiting passively for orders and directives, to take initiative and to infuse the spirit of justice into the mentality, customs, laws, and structures of the community in which they live and the country of which they are a part.

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In my hand is a loaf of bread. In this bread I see the companionship of people - for, throughout the ages, the sharing of bread together has been an act of friendship between persons. It is a means of communion between humans.

When we eat bread we are eating months of sunlight, days of rain, richness out of the earth. Bread eaten is mysteriously changed into the laughter and love of a person. We should be great, each of us, radiant, full of music, and full of stories, able to run and not be weary, to walk and not faint. Bread becomes personal life, and collectively the mighty deeds of many.

And so, as I look at this bread, I see in it children, youths, men and women of all countries; their hopes, their homes, their friendship.

What then shall I do with this bread?

Just as many grains of wheat, scattered abroad over the fields, being gathered together, become one with all people of the earth, I renew my membership in the realm of God.

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The RICH MAN and LAZARUS

There was once a rich man who dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury every day. There was also a poor man, named Lazarus, full of sores, who used to be brought to the rich man's door, hoping to fill himself with the bits of food that fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side, at the feast in heaven; the rich man died and was buried. He was in great pain in Hades; and he looked up and saw

(Lazarus, continued)

Abraham, far away, with Lazarus at his side. So he called out, 'Father Abraham! Take pity on me, and send Lazarus to dip his finger in some water and cool off my tongue, for I am in great pain in this fire!' But Abraham said: 'Remember, my son, that in your lifetime you were given all the good things, while Lazarus got all the bad things; but now he is enjoying it here, while you are in pain. Besides all that, there is a deep pit lying between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do it, nor can anyone cross over to us from where you are.' The rich man said, 'Well, father, I beg you, send Lazarus to my father's house, where I have five brothers; let him go and warn them so that they, at least, will not come to this place of pain.' Abraham said, 'Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them; let your brothers listen to what they say.' The rich man answered, 'That is not enough, father Abraham! But if someone were to rise from death and go to them, then they would turn from their sins.' But Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death.'"

This New Testament parable tells us of the calamity of not caring and not sharing in one another's needs. It is found in the Gospel of St. Luke chapter 16, verses 19 to 31.

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JUSTICE

Recently I had the opportunity to lead a discussion group of persons from the United and Baptist churches on the subject of justice. Justice was seen as virtue. Seven

cardinal virtues were listed by early Christian writers who added to the four virtues of Plato and the Stoics (prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice), three "theological virtues" (faith, hope, and love).

The following poem was written at the conclusion of another discussion group about justice and written by Nancy Hardy.

To study justice seems a contradiction in terms,  
 How can we study justice?  
 Justice means acting, making decisions, trying to break the barriers and equalize inequity, doesn't it?  
 Justice means struggling against principalities and powers.

Learning what the vision of the Realm of God is all about  
 Becoming a prophet as well as a politician,  
 Being responsible for our own actions  
 But also realizing that we are governed by the society in which we live,  
 So that we must move out and try to change that society.

In all discussion, frustration, listening, or not,  
 Learning and praying together  
 And having the hope that because we remember what God has done for us,  
 We can trust that the struggle is not in vain.  
 That peace will come  
 And justice will reign.

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*"...what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*

- Micah 6:8